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ABSTRACT

Funded by the Department of Education and Science in 1981, this study was carried out by a team of researchers from a polytechnic institute, a private university, and the Open University. A national sample of about 4,500 mature students who were taking a wide range of courses--from evening classes to full-time higher degrees--completed detailed questionnaires eliciting information on their background and educational experiences. Among those students sampled was a substantial number of distance students who form the subject matter of this paper. In order to discover the extent to which student populations vary, the students were divided into five groups: Open University undergraduates; Open University associate students; National Extension College students; NALGO Correspondence Institute students (a trade union for public sector employees); and private correspondence students. Following the return of the questionnaires, data were analyzed and summarized in 12 tables according to the following variables: age, sex, employment status, current educational qualifications, social class, subject of study, level of course, reason for taking the course, father's social class, qualifications held on leaving school, educational mobility, and social mobility. Results indicated that the student populations were very diverse, and it is suggested that each institution needs to survey its own student population when designing distance courses, rather than relying on findings from elsewhere. (2 references) (CGD)

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Distance students in the United Kingdom

Over the last hundred years correspondence study for adults has been a substantial — if little studied — part of the education and training of adults in the UK. Private colleges, non-profit making institutions, professional, trades union and political bodies were experienced in the provision of correspondence courses long before the Open University came on the scene. In 1981, a national survey of mature students included almost a third who were distance students. Alan Woodley, of the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University, was a member of the survey team.

Alan Woodley

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E.S. Henderson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Who is the distance learner? If you asked this question in the United Kingdom you might get an answer like 'A 35 year old teacher studying for a degree to improve his salary'. Such an answer stems from two phenomena:

1. The great majority of published statistics, newspaper stories, journal articles, etc, in the last 15 years have concerned the Open University and its students.
2. People seem to prefer a conception of an average or typical distance student despite repeated demonstrations that student populations are remarkably heterogeneous.

At any one time there are probably over half a million people studying at a distance in the United Kingdom. There are the large private correspondence colleges that have been in existence for many years and there are a variety of publicly-funded and non-profit making institutions. The courses they offer cover a vast range of subject areas and their levels range from introductory, non-qualifying to degree level and beyond. Given their diversity there is no reason to suppose that their student populations resemble that of the Open University. In 1981 the Department of Education and Science funded a national sample survey of mature students, to be carried out by a team of researchers from the Polytechnic of Central London, the University of Lancaster and the Open University. Some 4,500 mature students, who were taking courses ranging from pottery evening classes to full-time higher degrees in philosophy, completed detailed questionnaires concerning their backgrounds and educational experiences. The full results from this survey will be published in 1986.[1]

Among the national sample were substantial numbers of distance students who form the subject matter of this paper. In order to discover the extent to which distance student populations vary, they were divided into the following five groups:

1. Open University (OU-UG) N = 336 — Undergraduates. Students begin with a Foundation Course and accumulate credits towards a degree.
2. Open University associate students (OU-ASSOC) N = 329 — Students take courses on a one-off basis and pay the full economic course fee.
3. National Extension College (NEC) N = 410 — Students mainly taking introductory and Open University preparatory courses, O-and A-levels.
4. NALGO Correspondence Institute (NALGO) N = 130 — NALGO is a trade union for public sector employees. In the main the courses lead to diplomas and professional institute exams.
5. Private Correspondence Colleges (private) N = 297 — Students were sampled from two large colleges. The courses offered ranged widely from O-and A-levels to professional courses in accountancy, law, engineering etc.

Demographic Characteristics

Sex

In the case of the NALGO Correspondence Institute and the private correspondence colleges men outnumbered women by two to one but the position at the National Extension College was the exact reverse (Table 1). At the Open University men outnumbered women among the undergraduates but not among associate students.

Table 1 The sex of distance students

	OU-UG %	OU-ASSOC %	NEC %	NALGO %	PRIVATE %
Men	54	46	37	65	64
Women	46	54	63	35	36

Age

Again NALGO and the private sector were very similar with a high proportion of students in the 21–30 age group (Table 2). Numbers clearly peaked in the 31–40 age group among Open University undergraduates and, to a lesser extent, associate students.

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Table 2 The age of distance students

	OU-UG %	OU-ASSOC %	NEC %	NALGO %	PRIVATE %
21–30	24	30	37	68	66
31–40	48	38	34	26	24
41–60	24	28	24	6	10
61 and over	5	3	5	–	–

Employment status

In all cases the great majority of students were in paid work (Table 3). Housewives were fairly numerous among NEC students and Open University undergraduates.

Table 3 The employment status of distance students

	OU-UG %	OU-ASSOC %	NEC %	NALGO %	PRIVATE %
Paid work	75	82	64	99	81
Housewife	15	9	20	–	5
Unemployed	3	4	5	1	4
Retired	4	3	5	–	–
Other	3	2	6	–	10

Current Educational Qualifications

The NEC was doing the most, in relative terms, for people with no formal qualifications (Table 4). Generally speaking the NEC and the private colleges were catering more for those with low qualifications whereas Open University and NALGO students were already well qualified.

Table 4 The current educational qualifications of distance students

	OU-UG %	OU-ASSOC %	NEC %	NALGO %	PRIVATE %
None	6	5	20	2	12
O-level (or equiv)	19	9	40	12	37
A-level (or equiv)	24	16	20	28	29
Above A-level	50	70	21	58	23

Social class

The Open University and NALGO drew their students predominantly from what Hope and Goldthorpe term the 'Service' class (Table 5). Private colleges had the highest proportion of working class students.

Table 5 The social class (Hope and Goldthorpe) of distance students

	OU-UG %	OU-ASSOC %	NEC %	NALGO %	PRIVATE %
Service	71	82	44	83	46
Intermediate	20	14	45	17	36
Working	9	4	11	–	18

Table 6 The subject being studied by distance students

	OU-UG %	OU-ASSOC %	NEC %	NALGO %	PRIVATE %
Science	45	24	31	18	20
Arts	31	32	50	–	25
Social Science	24	44	19	82	55

Level of course

NEC students were mainly taking low-level non-qualifying courses and over half of those in private colleges were taking courses of A-level standard or below (Table 7).

Table 7 The level of course being studied by distance students

	OU-UG %	OU-ASSOC %	NEC %	NALGO %	PRIVATE %
Non-qualifying	–	–	57	–	–
O-level (or equiv)	–	–	25	5	33
A-level (or equiv)	–	–	15	38	23
Above A-level	100	100	5	58	44

Reason for taking the course

Table 8 shows the main reason given by each student for taking the present course. Job reasons were almost universal for NALGO students and the same pattern, in a less extreme form, was found among those in private colleges. Career reasons were also given by a quarter of the NEC students but intrinsic interest in the subject matter, desire to keep the mind active and entry to higher level courses were also very important.

Table 8 The main reason for taking the course

	OU-UG %	OU-ASSOC %	NEC %	NALGO %	PRIVATE %
Vocational	38	47	24	91	69
Interest in subject	24	27	21	3	6
Gain entry to higher course	1	2	19	2	6
Wanted an interest	18	14	15	3	4
Wanted a challenge	7	4	5	1	2
To improve self-confidence	3	1	3	1	4
To make up for lack of opportunity in the past	7	2	10	–	6
Other reasons	2	3	3	–	3

The present course

Subject of study

Science was the most popular subject for Open University undergraduates and Arts for NEC students (Table 6). In the other three categories social science subjects predominated, massively so in the case of NALGO.

Historic variables

Father's social class

Table 9 is remarkable for the relative degree of homogeneity compared with previous tables. In each category approximately four out of ten students had working class fathers, and one in three had fathers in the service class.

Table 9 The social class of distance students judged by father's occupation

	OU-UG %	OU-ASSOC %	NEC %	NALGO %	PRIVATE %
Service	33	36	35	32	34
Intermediate	27	28	27	30	22
Working	40	36	38	38	44

Qualfications held on leaving school

Despite similarities in original social class, differences had already emerged by the time of leaving school (Table 10). NALGO students were the most successful at school. Six out of ten left with A-levels or their equivalent compared with only two out of ten NEC students.

Table 10 School-leaving qualifications of distance students

	OU-UG %	OU-ASSOC %	NEC %	NALGO %	PRIVATE %
None	18	16	35	8	22
O-level or less	45	33	41	34	48
A-level	36	48	22	58	27
Other	1	4	2	1	3

Educational and social mobility

From a comparison of school and present qualifications (Tables 10 and 4) and father's and current social class (Tables 9 and 5) it is clear that large numbers of distance students had experienced a considerable amount of educational and social mobility. In this section we consider their mobility routes.[2]

Educational mobility

Each student's qualifications were coded at three stages of their life: on leaving school, at age 21 and at the time of the study. At each stage the codes were N (None) O (O-levels or equivalent) A (A-levels or equivalent) and H (Higher than A level). This gives 19 possible educational routes and so in Table 11 we present the three most common routes for each type of student. The figures show that for Open University and NALGO students the most common route was the conventional one of A-levels at school followed immediately by courses leading to higher qualifications. In the case of NEC and correspondence college students there was no mobility. Students joined their distance course with the same level of qualifications they had on leaving school.

Table 11 'Educational routes' of distance students

	OU-UG %	OU-ASSOC %	NEC %	NALGO %	PRIVATE %
1.	AHH	AHH	OOO	AHH	OOO
2.	OOH	AAH	NNN	AAH	AAA
3.	OOO	OOH	AAA	AAA	NNN

Social mobility

In a similar fashion each student's social class was coded at three stages using their father's job, their own first job and their present job. The jobs were coded into the Hope-Goldthorpe categories of Service (1) Intermediate (2) and Working (3). Again the three most common routes are shown in Table 12. Once more the NEC and correspondence college students were similar, the most common pattern being to have a working class father and to gain and remain in an intermediate job. Among Open University students the tendency was to enter a service class occupation immediately, regardless of class background, and to remain in one. The pattern for NALGO students was generally similar but many had come to the service class via an intermediate class position.

Table 12 'Occupational routes' of distance students

	OU-UG %	OU-ASSOC %	NEC %	NALGO %	PRIVATE %
1.	111	111	322	321	322
2.	311	311	122	111	122
3.	211	211	222	211	321

Conclusions

Books on how to write good distance courses advise would-be authors to have a picture of the student in their minds throughout the design process. This 'student-centred' approach is admirable in theory, but what does it mean in practice?

The preceding tables have demonstrated that the population of Open University students is different in many ways from those of other distance education institutions. Institutions can be paired in various ways using given variables but a complete matching is very unlikely. For instance, NALGO and private correspondence students appear to be very similar if one considers age, sex and motivation for study, but their educational qualifications and their social class positions are very different. Therefore it would seem necessary for each institution to survey its own students rather than rely on findings from elsewhere. As we move from 'distance learning' to 'open learning', with students having access to guided study materials at work and at home, linked, say, to an Open Tech project, it is likely that the student populations will become more rather than less diverse.

Even a study of a single institution has limited value for an author unless one can get down to the course level. Within the Open University for instance we know that the population on a third level Maths course is very different from that on an Arts foundation course. But even at the course level there will still be problems because adult distance learners are very heterogeneous. The students will vary in terms of their educational background, their reasons for study, and their home study environments. So when authors are told to have a picture of the student which student should they select? The 'weakest' student? A notional 'average' student? Surely any picture will be 'wrong', so perhaps the author should be aiming to design a course which is sufficiently flexible to cope with the great variety of students who will actually end up enrolling on it.

References

1 Woodley, A., Fulton, O., Wagner, L., Slowey, M. and Hamilton, M. (1986) *Coming back for more — a national survey of mature students*, SRHE/NFER-Nelson (In press).

2 These occupational and educational 'routes' are discussed more fully in a paper presented to the 1985 Society for Research in Higher Education annual conference. Woodley, A. *Classes and courses — who participates in continuing education.*